The Challenges of Teaching Popular Culture and World Politics

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KYLE GRAYSON, JUN 20 2015

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Over the past three decades, the discipline of International Relations has widened to include concerns beyond the Waltzian holy trinity of the man, the state, and war. It has also deepened to incorporate forms of analysis that are more probing of the political than the neo-neo synthesis or the polite face of constructivism that this synthesis has regurgitated. One of the consequences of the growing pluralism of the field has been the development of the popular culture–world politics continuum (Davies, Grayson and Philpott 2009) for both pedagogical and enquiry-driven aims. While there is an emerging literature on using artefacts of popular culture and cultural methods for assessment (Earnest and Fish 2014) in the International Relations seminar room, there has been very little examination of the challenges of teaching popular culture as an important constitutive element of world politics in its own right. In this article, I attempt to address this gap by drawing upon my own experiences as both a researcher and teacher of popular culture and world politics.

Why Do I Use Popular Culture?

I am primarily interested in how ideas, modes of interpretation, discourses, representations, and affects circulate and resonate across the continuum formed by popular culture and world politics. And part of the interest lies in being humble about the fact that I am still not precisely sure what popular culture and world politics entail. Thus, I remain receptive to news ways of understanding their connections, impacts, location, processes of production, distribution and consumption, as well as their audiences and modes of interpretation.

Popular culture is an important site where our understandings of the world, politics and identity are formed, contested and (re)formed. It produces imaginative geographies that orientate audiences, as well as emotional attachments and enmities that shape what is considered to be politically possible and desirable. Popular culture can serve as *a lingua franca*, connecting global audiences to local disputes, and contribute to discursive formations shaping debates from drone warfare (Grayson 2014a)[1] to intellectual property rights. Moreover, the material artefacts (Salter 2015) of popular culture themselves – such as mobile phones, fashion, the internet or food – are imbricated within global supply chains, distribution networks, patterns of consumption, and relations of power. Thus, given the prominence of popular culture in world politics, I would find it amiss to omit it from the teaching of international relations.

Key Challenges

Of course, it is one thing to claim the importance of a topic area and quite another to demonstrate that importance to students through pedagogical practice. Popular culture and world politics is no different in this regard. While some of the challenges that arise from teaching popular culture are not unique – for example, getting students to engage with the required reading – others either manifest themselves differently or are distinctive to this topic area. Drawing on my past decade of teaching and researching at the intersections of popular culture and world politics, the following challenges come to the front on my mind in terms of pedagogic practice.

What Are You Trying to Achieve?

All courses have specific learning aims and objectives that drive how they are taught. But within the remit of International Relations, there are at least four ways that popular culture can be used in the seminar room. Three of these analyse world politics through popular culture, while the fourth attempts to understand popular culture through world politics.

The first way is to read world politics through popular culture by using artefacts as allegorical devices to understand conceptual, theoretical, methodological and/or historical material. This is by far the most common way (Ruane and James 2008) in which popular culture is mobilised within International Relations teaching. Within this configuration, popular culture is a supplemental tool for conveying more orthodox International Relations subjects, rather than an object of study in its own right. For example, Cindy Weber (2014) has written an excellent textbook that uses film as a way of unpacking the assumptions underpinning theories of International Relations, while Daniel Drezner (2009) has used the conceit of a zombie apocalypse to introduce students to theoretical traditions in the field. The unfortunate downside is that using popular culture as a supplement can feed into narrow conceptions (Hannah and Wilkinson 2014) of what world politics is and what is important to the field of International Relations.

A second way is to analyse international relations aesthetically (Bleiker 2001). In this configuration, artefacts of popular culture are deployed to provide alternative readings of world politics by focusing on their representations, affects and embodied practices. For example, Michael J. Shapiro (2010) has argued that films such as*Devil in a Blue Dress* are able to show how historically constructed racial orders – largely missed by orthodox approaches to international relations (Vitalis 2000) – are revealed through the bodily comportment of the film's main characters. Similarly, there has been work undertaken on the weaponisation of sound, including using music to torture (Cusick 2006) and rhythm as means to produce feelings of rage that are conducive to acts of violence (Protevi 2010).

A third way is to treat artefacts of popular culture as vernacular theorisations of world politics (McLaughlin 1998) that either promote hegemonic understandings of international relations or produce counter-hegemonic understandings of the status quo. For example, Nick Robinson (2015) has recently explored the ambiguous role of American exceptionalism in video games, while Andrew Boulton (2008) has analysed the imaginative geographies of country music in the aftermath of 9/11.

A fourth way is to reverse the direction of analysis and read popular culture thorough world politics. The primary aim here is to be able to find answers to the question: what can world politics tell us about popular culture? This can include explorations of the forms of cultural production and commercialisation underpinning global relations of power (Lisle and Pepper 2005), the use of metaphors and tropes (Grayson 2014) by key actors that draw from popular culture, how specific modes of cultural interpretation are distributed globally (Mathijs 2006), and how world politics provides affective and/or phenomenological dynamics that shape popular culture (Altheide 2006).

Each of these readings provides a slightly different emphasis along the popular culture–world politics continuum. Thus, how one wishes to connect popular culture and world politics is going to affect how a course is structured, the readings that are selected, the kinds of artefacts that are used, and the ways in which seminar time is organised.

How to Structure the Course?

For many topic areas in International Relations there are tried and tested course structures that have been deployed over several generations to present introductory and advanced-level treatments. Even for those who wish to do things differently, there is, at least, a norm to be rebutted. Teaching the popular culture–world politics continuum, though, is largely *tabula rasa* in terms of structure. It could be done thematically, for example through traditional international relations topic areas (e.g. nuclear war), more diffuse but pertinent subjects (e.g. the politics of belonging), or genres from within popular culture (e.g. hip-hop). One could also structure a course by medium (for example, radio, television, film, music, literature, food) or by thinkers/key texts (for example, Stuart Hall, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Rancière, *To Seek Out New Worlds* [Weldes 2003]). Method provides another way of arranging a course by having sections that speak to specific ways of analysing the popular culture-world politics continuum (for

example, semiotics, discourse analysis or narratology).

Again, what will work best is going to depend on what you are trying to achieve more broadly and what you wish to emphasise within the popular culture–world politics continuum. From past practice, I have found that the further I have moved away from what will be immediately received by students as textual or visual towards other sensibilities like sound, touch, taste and feeling, the more pedagogically rewarding the experience has become. For example, in a MA-level course, I lead a week on hip-hop where the focus is on how this medium has developed a sonic landscape in conjunction with Islam – beginning in the United States, but more recently in North Africa. Rather than focus on the immediate lyrical content, students are encouraged to explore what they are hearing (e.g. beats, melodies, timbre, tone, voice, patterns of rhyme) and how it has been produced (e.g. drum machines, sampling) in order to unpack the ways in which forms of power and resistance circulate globally.

Moving Beyond the Allegorical?

My experience has been that getting students to analyse the popular culture-world politics continuum beyond allegorical connections that may link artefacts and international relations is a considerable challenge. Moreover, recent research (Holland 2014) has suggested that weaker students may even struggle to understand very simple metaphors that might bind an artefact (for example, the book *World War Z*) to issues like migration. However, this is not to say that one should not try; what this does mean is that one needs to be realistic about what students will initially be capable of undertaking.

Know Your Students

A common mistake when teaching popular culture and world politics is to overestimate the skill set that students will bring with them into the course. Students will likely not be as culturally aware or technologically savvy as typical media reporting would lead you to believe. Thus, it is important not to make assumptions about cultural knowledge or the ability of students to navigate – or have access to – specific technologies, content delivery mechanisms or media forms.

Similarly, students will initially lack the conceptual or methodological tools to provide analyses of cultural artefacts beyond the identification of reflective similarities in content to events they already identify as being 'international relations'. This can make it difficult to push students beyond conventional accounts of what world politics might be. The challenge may be even more pronounced in educational contexts like the UK, where students begin to specialise prior to university and may have very little background in the arts and humanities or any form of methods training beyond an introductory research skills class. Thus, as in other parts of the International Relations curriculum, it can be a struggle to get students to develop and apply conceptual and methodological material. This can be compounded by a sense that 'anything goes' when it comes to analysing popular culture. Thus, it can take a considerable amount of effort and determination as a teacher to get students to understand that while there may be many approaches to analysing popular culture and world politics, each has a set of requirements for analytic rigour that should be met.

There is also a tendency to underestimate the unconventional social dynamics that may arise in the classroom. Our identities and political subjectivities are very much imbricated into our practices of cultural consumption (Warde 2005), including our likes and dislikes. Moreover, within social groupings, being a cultural taste-maker (that is, an individual who discovers interesting cultural content before other group members) can be a desirable position. However, the classroom is not the place for you to undertake this role. It is important to remember that students are unlikely to share similar ideas of 'cool' amongst themselves, let alone with you.

In more participatory or problem-based classroom contexts this may mean that students are reticent to draw upon their own experiences (e.g. as gamers) or bring in artefacts for analysis out of a fear that they will be judged by peers and classified accordingly. Thus, it is important to create an environment where students feel secure in taking risks knowing that even if these do not pay off, there will be no lingering judgments regarding what it says about them as a person. It also helps to have thick skin yourself for those times in which your own tastes are exposed as being ridiculously naff.

Forms of Assessment?

As a subject area, popular culture and world politics lends itself to alternative modes of assessment, such as videos, song writing, painting, literature, dance, comics, programming, and so on, and many who teach in this area encourage students to submit work for assessment that goes beyond the standard 10-20 page research paper. While this is laudable, anecdotal evidence suggests that most students prefer to stay within the comfort zone of familiar assessment types. This is particularly the case in systems – like the UK – where a single form of assessment may be worth between 50-100 per cent of the final course grade. Thus, students often do not want to take the gamble of attempting unfamiliar tasks for credit.

If you are interested in pushing the frontiers of assessment in International Relations and having student buy-in, it may therefore be valuable to provide a safety net of sorts, such as a reflective essay on what the student hoped to show with the alternative assessment, whether it met the initial aims – and if not, why it may have fallen short – and what was learned about popular culture and world politics through the creative process itself. It is also worth considering what alternative forms will be assessing in relation to the learning aims and objectives of the course, and whether you have the same competencies to assess a mash-up video or photographic exhibition as you would a standard research paper.

Lessons Learned?

In teaching popular culture and politics, there are two final lessons I have learned. The first is that while it involves a considerable amount of preparation in terms of gathering appropriate artefacts, the most effective means of teaching the popular culture–world politics continuum from my experience has been to organise classroom time such that the focus is on applying theoretical and conceptual insights to the analysis of cultural artefacts using specific methods.

For example, as part of an initiative that involves video-linked teaching between Newcastle University in the UK and York University in Canada, we have had students compare the opening ceremonies to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver[2] and the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London,[3] paying particular attention to the narratives running through these spectacles. To apply the concept of the male gaze, I have had students conduct semiotic analyses of beer adverts. To explore practices of memorialisation and erasure that are central to the re-emergence of imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989) within England, we have sent students around the Newcastle area to look at war memorials and other forms of commemoration[4] that dot the urban landscape. Thus, orientating a module towards problem-based/experiential learning by building up student skills on a weekly basis towards a final project or outcome can be a particularly rewarding way of teaching the popular culture and world politics continuum.

I have been relatively lucky in terms of the levels of resistance I have received from colleagues, university managers and external examiners – who may be more orthodox in their understanding of international relations – with respect to teaching popular culture. But when resistance did emerge, a second lesson that I quickly learned was that the terms 'pilot project' and 'advanced research methods training' can provide a lot of cover for heterodox approaches to the field of International Relations and pedagogy within the UK context.

Notes

[1] Grayson, K. (2014) 'Drones and Video Games', *E-International Relations*, <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/25/drones-and-video-games/>.

[2] olympicvancouver2010, 'Complete Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony', *YouTube*, < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxZpUueDAvc>

[3] Olympics, 'Opening Ceremony – London 2012 Olympic Games', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4As0e4de-rI>

[4] Urwin, W., 'Boer War Memorial', *Flickr*, < https://www.flickr.com/photos/mals-pics/6501138409/>

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About the author:

Kyle Grayson is a Senior Lecturer in International Politics at Newcastle University. His most recent book is Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing: On Drones, Counter-Insurgency, and Violence published in the Interventions Series by Routledge. Twitter: @chasing_dragons